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Trouble Stalks the NSC

Adm. John Poindexter's unannounced choice to fill a key National Security Council job has met resistance both inside and outside the White House, a mini-revolt that suggests new difficulties for President Reagan's troubled NSC staff.

The admiral's decision to elevate his longtime Navy friend, Rodney McDaniel, to the job of NSC executive secretary is the leading edge of new problems besetting the once-potent national security staff. The root of grievances about McDaniel's appointment is not his ability but his close relationship with retired Adm. Stansfield Turner, President Jimmy Carter's CIA director, whose opposition to covert operations was an issue in Reagan's 1980 campaign.

That Poindexter's first major staff decision is in trouble has raised concern that his lack of political experi-

ence may cost him dearly in dealing with the bureaucracy and Congress.

Poindexter sought Pentagon approval in 1984 to have McDaniel, then a Navy captain, routinely assigned to the NSC staff. White House sources told us that Navy Secretary John Lehman refused, not on grounds of McDaniel's competence but because of his long and close relationship with Turner, whom he had served as executive secretary.

Poindexter refused to accept Lehman's "no." He persuaded McDaniel to retire from the Navy and join the NSC staff as a civilian. His work there as chief planner for crisis management has been exemplary.

But Reaganites are far more alarmed over the implications of the new job Poindexter has in store for McDaniel. As NSC executive secretary, and deputy assistant to the

president, he would become No. 3 after Poindexter and chief deputy Donald Fortier. That would give him Oval Office access, control of the NSC paper flow, influence over hiring and firing and major policy input.

Poindexter himself is viewed by Reaganites as a staunch conservative, but one who is singularly devoid of his boss' strong ideological convictions. He has been unmoved by alarm bells sounded by some of his own staffers about implications of the McDaniel appointment.

A firm working relationship with the Pentagon is clearly imperative for any well-functioning national security staff. Bitter disputes between the Defense and State departments over SALT II, technology transfers, regional conflicts and covert operations can be mediated only by an NSC staff that is respected and feared.

Poindexter's own allies warn him that any taint of what they call "Turnerism" in Rod McDaniel could undermine the national security staff's political clout, rendering the president less protected from parochial bureaucrats.

That argument is being quietly reinforced inside the White House by the presence of another Turner protege as chief of staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee. Retired Navy captain Bernard F. McMahon, appointed a year ago when Sen. David Durenberger (R-Minn.) became committee chairman, has made no secret of his strong opposition to covert operations.

Reaganite critics are claiming that McDaniel's appointment would strengthen forces across the board that oppose all clandestine aid. Moreover, they believe that Reagan right now is planning such sub rosa operations against Libya.

Longtime specialists with no ax to grind have advised Poindexter that what he needs more than a controversial executive secretary is a top-flight operations officers—a tough staff man to do for him what he successfully did for Bud McFarlane. "John Poindexter needs a John Poindexter," one longtime NSC staffer who recently resigned told us: he needs time to move out of the NSC cocoon that contained him during the McFarlane era and into the rough world of congressional politics, bureaucratic feuding and media vantage points.

If, instead of heading toward that sensible goal, Poindexter appoints his controversial colleague as executive assistant, he may be moving himself in the opposite direction.

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